

A Short Course in Bean-ology

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A while back, the National Garden Bureau compiled some interesting information about beans. The bean group includes snap beans, limas (called "butter beans" down South), and all the beans grown for dried seeds -- kidney, pinto, great northern, navy, and the like. There are also relatives in different bean species -- scarlet runner, asparagus bean, winged bean; black-eye, crowder, and purple hull pea (they're really beans); garden soybean; fava or broad bean; and garbanzo bean. Beans are a warand purple hull pea (they're really beans); garden soybean; fava or broad bean; and garbanzo bean. Beans are a warap beans "string" beans? You still hear this term, especially where they grow 'Kentucky Wonder,' the old-fashioned climber with strings like shoelaces. However, you seldom see real, string beans anymore. The bean breeders bred the strings out of them, so most varieties are now called snap beans. They also bred out most of the fiber, so you can eat fully-mature pods and not have to pick them at the half-grown stage. Buy snap beans that are resistant to plant diseases and set pods in warm weather.

Lima and Butter Beans - The difference between butter beans and lima beans is based on the size of the pods and seeds. The small-seeded, butter beans tolerate more heat, but it takes forever to shell a mess of butter beans!

In cooler areas, some of the runner types of the large-seeded, lima beans have pods 5 inches long, with half a dozen big, flat seeds per pod. Some of the bush types have small, fat seeds in nearly round pods. These are called "potato limas." Lima and butter beans with speckled seeds have a stronger taste than the white- or green-seeded varieties.

Scarlet Runner Beans - Scarlet runner beans have long been grown for their gorgeous, red blossoms and long, dark-green pods. The foliage is handsome, and the runners can climb up to 12 feet. The seeds are good in stews, and the flowers attract hummingbirds.

Shelly Beans - Horticultural or "Shelly beans" are special varieties grown mostly to be shelled out of the pods while the seeds are still moist and tender. The seeds shell out quickly and easily and can be cooked without soaking. You can recognize these beans by the red stripes on the pods and the splashes of red color on the dry seeds. The dry seeds are so colorful that they are often used in craft projects and glued into patterns on boards.

You can buy bush or climbing varieties of Shelly beans. Grow enough to freeze and to dry and use in bean soups.

Southern Peas - Southern peas are not at all like green peas; they are more like beans. They are a warm-weather crop that likes heat and humidity.

Black-eyed peas are Southern peas. So are crowder pea, purple hull, knuckle-hull, cream pea, lady pea, silver skin, clay pea, and dozens of other local favorites. You can snap and eat the young pods or shell and eat the seeds green or dry. Livestock will eat the plants and pods. At one time, Southern peas were called cowpeas for that very reason.

Asparagus Beans - If you want to grow "bragging beans," try asparagus beans, sometimes called "yard longs." You will occasionally see pods two feet long, but true, yard-long pods would be a rarity. Harvest while tender and green, and treat as a snap bean. Grow in warm climates for good production, and provide tall trellises.

Fava, Windsor, Broad, and Horse Beans - All are names for the same bean. They are popular along the Mediterranean and in northern Europe, but have not caught on big in this country. They require cool weather and will even withstand light frost when the plants are small, so they don't do well during the summer heat in most of Virginia.

Fava bean plants grow about waist high and have long, broad pods of a waxy, green color. The dry seeds are flattened and round like big, brown buttons. You can cook the dried seeds for salads or soups.

Garbanzo Beans - You will rarely see garbanzos or chick peas growing anywhere except in central California. There, they are planted in early spring, and the dry seeds are harvested in the summer. The plants look more like vetch than beans. Pods are short and numerous; each pod contains two or three plump seeds. The dried or commercial beans are so cheap there is little point in growing your own. Save the garden space and use it for growing snap beans.

Bush and Pole Beans - Most gardeners choose bush beans, the sprinters of the bean family. They come on with a rush, give you three or four heavy harvests, then collapse at the finish line. Gardeners plant a second and maybe a third crop to be coming in as the spent beans are pulled out.

Pole beans are like long-distance runners. They come on slow, but they keep on coming, giving harvests again and again. It's more trouble to put up arbors and tripods to support the climbing vines, but each plant will give you twice as much from the same space as bush varieties.

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